

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A), Sept. 28, 2008

Ezekiel 18:25-28; Psalm: 25; Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 21:28-32

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Jesus parable in today' gospel is a challenge to everybody who professes to be a religious believer. It is a warning against the hypocrisy of trying to use our faith to show how much better we are than others.

A man orders one of his sons to work in the vineyard; the first son says "I will not," but has a change of heart and goes to work. The other son immediately says yes but doesn't go. This second son talks the talk of being a disciple, without walking the walk. Hypocrisy in action. The son who first seems to turn away ends up as a true disciple.

Jesus initially addressed today's parable to the religious authorities of his day. It got him in big trouble. Because of such teaching, people decided to have Jesus put to death. But the parable is not simply directed to the Jewish leaders of Jesus' time. In Matthew's gospel, it is a warning to the members of Christian community, and thus to us.

Jesus goes even farther than a warning against hypocrisy. He says the son who really does what the gospel calls for is like people who were considered notorious sinners in Jesus's time—tax collectors and prostitutes. Tax collectors were collaborators with the Roman Empire's occupation of Israel, so they were regarded as traitors. Prostitutes were regarded as such

serious sinners that they should be stoned to death. These are really bad people in the eyes of Jesus's contemporaries.

The extraordinary reversal in today's gospel is that Jesus says these sinners are the people who say yes and become his truest disciples. Initially they said no to God, but hearing the good news they change the direction of their lives like the first son and end up as Jesus true followers. The chief priests and elders are like the second son. They too have heard the good news, but they only feign acceptance. Isn't this why it is so easy to identify some religious people as hypocrites? It is why in another gospel passage Jesus says "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the reign of God, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

In fact, Jesus had a special affinity for sinners like these tax collectors and prostitutes. The gospels describe Jesus as a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" and tell us that while Jesus was at table "many tax collectors and sinners" came and sat with him. You can see why this got Jesus in trouble.

There is a marvelous exhibit of the art of Georges Rouault at the McMullen Art Museum at BC right now that can help us understand this. The exhibit displays some of Rouault's great paintings of the face of Christ side by side with extraordinary pictures of prostitutes. Why would a great Christian artist like Rouault devote much of his work to the renderings of

sinful prostitutes? One commentator has said it is because he knew how much they needed the redemption of Christ. But I think this is a superficial interpretation. All one needs to do is look at a few of the central paintings in the exhibit to see that the faces of the prostitutes and the face of Christ are almost identical in appearance. One can see them as the same person.

For Rouault, Christ not only redeems prostitutes. Christ is in the prostitutes; Christ is the prostitutes. These women have been so abused that their only option for survival is to sell even themselves. St. Paul tells us in the second reading that Christ so loved us that he did not cling to likeness to God but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. In the same way, we could say, that Christ so loves human beings in all our weakness and even sinfulness that he has taken the form of one who has been driven to the depths--a prostitute. Christ is with tax collectors and prostitutes; he is in them because he loves them. No wonder they fully responded to the gospel.

Of course, none of us has responded fully to the call of God's love. We are all sinners. If we admit we are like tax-collectors and prostitutes who first did not respond to Christ's call, there is surely hope for us like there was for them. Since Jesus welcomes sinner to his table, we come to his table knowing all of us are welcome despite our weakness and failures.

St. Ignatius Church September 28, 2008 David Hollenbach, S.J.